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SOME SALIVA CHARMS.

THIS brief, fragmentary paper forms part of a somewhat extended monograph upon saliva superstitions in the United States. The pages of the article which deal more particularly with the subject of folk-medicine are now in the hands of the editor of the "Popular Science Monthly," and will be published, at his convenience, in the pages of that periodical. When the entire paper appears in permanent form, there will be appended a more complete list of references to authorities cited.

Whether or not the superstition still lives, I cannot say, but a well-known scientist tells me that, forty years ago, it was customary, about Portland, Maine, in passing dead dogs, cats, and so on, to spit three times on the carrion, to prevent the passer-by from catching the itch. A lady brought up in Boston relates a similar notion familiar to her in childhood, namely, that if one encountered any dead animal and did not spit three times he would certainly die of its disease. Dr. Buck states that in Suabia it is customary for the wayfarer to spit upon carrion that he encounters by the roadside, lest he should become mangy through its influence.¹

The Romans, in the time of Pliny, believed that contagion might be repelled by spitting.² Were these superstitions simple outgrowths of the natural impulse one has to spit after encountering an offensive odor? If so, then possibly an old Aztec saying that one must *not* spit after meeting a polecat, lest he grow white-headed, may be accounted for by remembering how common it has been and is, among primitive peoples, or uneducated individuals, to distrust as unhealthful or unsafe that which is natural.

An old gentleman, who well remembers the practice, states that in the neighborhood of Salem, Massachusetts, sixty or seventy years ago, boys out bird's-nesting were wont to spit in the palm of one hand and then to strike the saliva a quick blow with the forefinger of the other, saying:—

Spit, spat, spot,
Tell me where that bird's-nest is.

The direction of the most prominent drop of flying spittle indicated the locality of the nest. A similar process is now resorted to in many places all the way from Maine to Illinois in searching for lost articles. Children in Salem, Massachusetts, to-day in look-

¹ *Medizinischer Volksglauben und Volksaberglauben aus Schwaben*, Dr. M. R. Buck, p. 42.

² Pliny's *Natural History*, Bohn's edition, vol. v. p. 288.

ing for anything lost or mislaid, vary the bird's-nesting rhyme above given into :—

Spit, spat, spo !
Where 'd that go ?

The direction in which the spittle flies points out the whereabouts of whatever is sought. A mnemonic device now found in Salem is to spit on the palm of one hand, or the inner side of the wrist, to remind one where something mislaid may be found. I know of a large business place in that city where you may very often see an aged clerk, when he fails to remember just where he has placed some needed substance or utensil, quickly slip back his cuff and make at least a pretence of spitting on his hand, to assist his tardy memory. A gentleman whose boyhood was spent in a New Hampshire country town recalls a custom as there very common among schoolboys on the ball-ground, thirty or forty years ago, when they had lost sight of their ball. It was, as above described, to spit in the palm of one hand, and strike the spittle with the forefinger, meanwhile repeating :—

Spitter, spatter !
Which way 's that ball gone ?

From a multitude of superstitions that have come under my own notice, I take it that there still exists in the United States a widespread belief that there is some magic power either in human saliva, or in the act of spitting according to prescribed formulæ. It is easy to identify many of our American superstitions regarding saliva as direct descendants of ancient Aryan customs and beliefs ; others are modified forms of the latter ; while still a third class would appear, from the lack of any evidence to the contrary, to be not only indigenous, but also of recent origin.

A volume might be written upon the origin, history, and ethnical distribution of the many curious mistaken beliefs concerning the powers of spittle. Such fancies appear in various Greek and Roman writers, and they pervade the whole history of magic, through the Middle Ages down almost to the present time. Employed now to bless, now to curse, now to injure, now to cure, by peoples intellectually as far apart as the Jews and the South Sea Islanders, mediaeval Christians and the Central Africans of to-day — truly the potencies of this usually harmless secretion have been most widely credited.

The custom of using spittle in some manner, as part of the ceremony of naming children, or as a lustral rite, appears to have had a very extended range, both geographically and historically. Theocritus says :—

See how old beldams expatiations make ;
To atone the gods, the bantling up they take ;

His lips are wet with lustral spittle; thus
They hope to make the gods propitious.

In pagan Rome, lustration by means of spittle was one of the ceremonies employed in naming a child on the *dies nominalis*, and this custom has been traced as the probable origin of a similar practice in the early Roman Catholic Church.¹ That the Arabs made use of a similar ceremony would appear probable from the following incident, narrated in Ockley's "History of the Saracens":²—

"Of Hasan they relate that he was very much like his Grand-father, Mahomet, who, when he was born, spat in his Mouth and named him Hasan." According to Mungo Park's "Travels in the Interior of Africa," in christening Mandingo children:—

"He [the schoolmaster] whispered a few sentences in the child's ear and spat three times in its face."³

Purification of the warrior who had killed an enemy was generally deemed necessary by the various tribes of American Indians. Among the Pimas of Arizona, one feature of the ceremony consisted in the transference of saliva from the mouth of the officiating medicine-man to that of the warrior.⁴

The ancients considered spittle a charm against all kinds of fascination. Theocritus, in describing the demeanor of a city beauty repelling the advances of a rustic wooer, says: "Speaking thus, she spat thrice upon her breast."

Pliny, in many places, shows the high regard of the Romans for the remedial and other virtues of saliva.

According to the Biblical narrative, it was with spittle that Jesus wet the clay with which he anointed the eyes of the blind man. An Oriental belief in the curative effect of human saliva is, in all probability, thus indicated.

Among the early Saxons, saliva was an important ingredient of a holy salve.⁵

Akin to the belief in the ceremonial value of spittle, and identical with the early Greek and Roman confidence in its efficacy in warding off evil influences, is the faith shown by the practice, mentioned in Ennemoser's "History of Magic," of spitting three times before the house of a witch.⁶ In Mungo Park's "Travels" there is an

¹ Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, Bohn's edition, vol. iii. p. 259.

² Ed. of 1718, vol. ii. p. 100.

³ Op. cit., vol. i. p. 263.

⁴ Report of Captain Grossman, U. S. A., in *Smithsonian Report*, 1870, pp. 416, 417.

⁵ W. G. Black's *Folk-Medicine*.

⁶ Ennemoser's *History of Magic*, Howitt's translation, Bohn's ed., vol. ii. p. 201.

account of the preparation of a charm, or "saphie," to insure a safe journey, by muttering a few sentences and spitting upon a stone laid on the ground.

Spitting in a hole made in the ground constituted one of the ceremonies of making a peace with the Apaches of the Rio Gila, more than half a century ago, as described in Pattie's "Narrative."¹ Naturally charms of this character are seriously resorted to only by very superstitious races at the present day, as the Transylvanians, for instance, who spit to keep off the influence of devils, or the Irish peasantry, who overcome evil influences by spitting on the object feared and saying, "God bless it." This spitting must not be done by the person in whose behalf the protection is invoked, but it must be at his request.²

Among the South Sea Islanders it is believed that injuries may be worked upon the producer of spittle, if sorcerers chance to get hold of it, and so the chiefs are followed about by spittoon-bearers, who collect and bury the dangerous product.

Paul Kane, in his "Artist's Wanderings in North America," writes: "The Columbia River Indians are never seen to spit without carefully obliterating all traces of their saliva. This they do lest an enemy should find it, in which case they believe he would have the power of doing them some injury. They always spit on their blanket, if they happen to wear one at the time."

Captain John G. Bourke³ writes me: "In my personal experience, I noticed at an early day that all wild Indians (that is, all who had never been on a reservation) had the custom of carefully spitting in their blankets or mantles."

According to Dr. Buck, Suabian folk-medicine prescribes that one should at once tread into the ground the spittle which he ejects, lest some evil-disposed person employ it for sorcery.⁴

These customs are doubtless based upon a superstition not unlike that held by the believers in witchcraft in our own early history, who felt sure that pain could be inflicted upon people by means of images made to resemble them, and then punctured with pins and needles, or otherwise maltreated.

Brand relates a curious custom of boys in the North of England, namely, that of pledging their faith, "their saul," by spitting, just

¹ Cincinnati, Ohio, 1833, p. 77.

² Vide Lady Wilde's *Ancient Legends and Superstitions of Ireland*, one-volume edition, pp. 72, 130, 141, 193.

³ Author of a valuable monograph: *Notes and Memoranda bearing on the Use of Human Ordure and Human Urine in Rites of a Religious or Semi-Religious Character, etc.* Washington, D. C., 1888.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 42.

as an American boy will say, "I hope to die if it is n't true."¹ And Newcastle colliers bind a compact, in combining together for protection against their employers, by spitting together upon a stone.² The scattered illustrations just mentioned may serve as a hint of the great variety and wide distribution of mythical conceptions about saliva.

Countless seems to be the number of spittle charms still practised, either to avert an evil omen or to bring good luck. There is a popular saying of very wide range that to turn any garment that by accident has been put on wrong side out betokens bad luck. In Central Maine it is said that this may be averted by spitting on the garment as you take it off to turn it; while in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I find the notion that if one's dress be turned up at the bottom, so as to show the facing or wrong side of the hem, one needs only to spit on the dress as it is turned down to secure a new one.

In St. John, N. B., there is a popular feeling of reluctance to walk under a ladder leading against a building, and so one may often see passers-by furtively spit, to avert misfortune, as they walk beneath a ladder so placed as to make inconvenient a circuit outside of its foot. This counter-charm is in all probability a direct importation from England, where it is common.³

An old Roman counter-charm was to spit into the right shoe before putting it on the foot, or to spit into the right shoe before going into any peril.⁴ Another, to spit when passing by any place where danger had been incurred.⁵ According to Pliny, it was a Roman custom to wet a finger with spittle and place it behind the ear to allay disquietude of mind.⁶ The same writer tells us that the Romans had a prejudice against meeting a person lame in the right leg, and that it was believed that the evil influence of such an unpropitious encounter might be repelled simply by spitting.⁷ We have a pretty widespread and strongly held superstition that it is unlucky to meet one who is cross-eyed, and here again the counter-charm is the old Roman one of spitting as you pass the person. Some people do the same (for luck they say) when they meet a negro. The Russians say that it is bad luck to meet a priest, and the popular belief is that to avert misfortune one must, in passing, spit on the holy father's beard. Certainly neither a very cleanly nor a very reverent device.

¹ Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, Bohn's ed., vol. iii. p. 261.

² *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

³ *Notes and Queries*, London, 3d series, vol. vii. p. 433.

⁴ Pliny's *Natural History*, Bohn's ed., vol. v. p. 290.

⁵ *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. v. p. 284.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. v. p. 290.

The saying, that to spit over the little finger of the right hand at sight of a white horse will bring good luck, is sent to me from Illinois and from various parts of eastern Massachusetts ; also from St. John, N. B. In Peabody, Massachusetts, the general notion of good luck is made definite, and money is promised to one who carries out the ceremony of spitting over the little finger whenever a white horse is seen. A Salem, Massachusetts, charm is to count every white horse you see, spitting at each one, until you have reached a hundred ; after the one hundredth, make a wish, and it will certainly come true.

In Central Maine you will hear it said that if the left hand itch you must instantly spit on it, and rub the side or hip, and you will soon receive money. Indeed, half in jest, half in earnest, you may often see persons from that part of the country go through with this money-getting charm.

A New Hampshire practice is to spit on a piece of money, for luck, before pocketing it. Some one told me of seeing a servant girl in Lowell, Massachusetts, on receiving a piece of silver, quickly spit on it and slip it inside her stocking, nodding meanwhile, and saying "for luck."

In Jones's "Credulities" mention is made of a custom found among the inhabitants of Weardale, County Durham, England, of spitting for luck on the first coin received in the morning, or the first taken in any kind of business.¹ This piece of money is commonly called a handsel in England and in parts of Scotland. The original Anglo-Saxon word from which "handsel" comes meant the act of joining hands, as was the usual old English custom when two parties had concluded a bargain. This sealing of a bargain or sale was further ratified by giving a piece of money as an earnest. I believe the custom still exists in parts of Great Britain ;² and with us to this day an expression often heard when two people have agreed upon some plan of action or concluded some minor business transaction is, "Let us shake hands on it." Undoubtedly a partial survival of the old English usage just mentioned. The name handsel, originally meaning the ceremony of striking or joining hands, at length seems to have been attached to the coin given as a last security that a transfer of property had been effected. English hucksters and fishwomen much esteem the handsel, or first money taken in a day, regarding it as an omen for further sales. Travelers relate that London venders may often be observed to spit upon their handsel, sometimes to kiss the coin, and to put it in a pocket by

¹ *Credulities, Past and Present*, by William Jones, London, 1880, pp. 544, 545.

² Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, Bohn's edition, vol. iii. p. 262.

itself as a talisman for business luck.¹ In Truro, N. S., Irish women, who go about from house to house selling laces or other small wares, upon receiving money for their first sale often say, "God bless you," and then spit on the money before pocketing it. I do not find that the name handsel has been transplanted to the United States, but the old country superstitious regard for the money from a first sale we find among us. Peddlers generally are anxious to begin to sell, and are sometimes even known to lower prices upon setting out in order to secure a purchaser, feeling that this first money in hand will bring more. Some months since, in Waltham, Massachusetts, a man was going through the streets selling simple microscopes. They were very good instruments, consisting of two lenses conveniently arranged, and giving a good field and excellent amplification. They sold for three dollars each, not an unreasonable price for the kind of glass. The seller, eager to make an opening sale, disposed of one to a gentleman for seventy-five cents. It was known that others afterwards paid the full price, and when friends of this first lucky purchaser tried to get a reduction, and said that they had understood that a glass had been sold as low as seventy-five cents, the peddler positively refused to sell a single other one for less than three dollars.

It was an old French belief that to spit in the fire on rising in the morning was an ill omen.² A correspondent from Northern Ohio writes me the two following popular notions: If one chance to spit on a stove he will in consequence have a sore mouth, while accidentally spitting on yourself means that some one is about to tell an untruth about you. The accident of spitting on any garment has a lucky signification in Central Maine, where it is said to foretell a new garment. A Northern Ohio mode of fortune-telling was as follows: spit on a hot shovel, and the saliva will froth up and dance over the hot iron. The direction taken, if this moving bubble slide off the shovel, indicates "where you will go to live," but if the saliva dry up on the shovel the inference is that you are destined to stay where you are.

The fashion boys have of spitting on their fish-bait to secure a bite, which seems to be pretty general among us, is, I find, very common among the Japanese. Frank Buckland, in his "Curiosities of Natural History," records a practice, among the fishermen of Portsmouth, England, of spitting on the boat-anchor before letting it go, to insure luck and to make the fish bite.³ An allied custom, common among trappers in Central Maine, that of spitting on the

¹ Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, Bohn's ed., vol. iii. p. 262.

² J. B. Thiers, *Traite des Superstitions*, Paris, 1745, vol. i. p. 209.

³ *Curiosities of Natural History*, 3d series.

bait of the traps which they set for foxes, I have not as yet elsewhere encountered.

We have all noticed how men and boys are given to spitting on their hands before making certain physical efforts, notably in lifting, chopping wood, in handling a hoe, a scythe, or a pitchfork. Blacksmiths, too, frequently spit at or on their hands before picking up the sledge, and that this usage among men of their craft, when about to make any unusual exertion, dates back more than two and a half centuries, may be gathered from William Browne's description of a smith shoeing some "stborne nagge of Galloway": —

Or unbacked jennet or a Flanders mare,
That at the forge stand snuffing of the ayre;
The swarthy smith *spits in his buckhorne fist*,
And bids his man bring out the fivefold twist.¹

I dare say every one has noticed the catcher on a ball-ground, in making ready to seize the ball, spit on his palms, often hastily rubbing them together. The habit is very general among ball-players, from small boys to college students. One who attends games on the Cambridge, Mass., base-ball grounds tells me that the Harvard undergraduates may often be observed to make use of this very doubtful aid to their skill. After questioning a good many people of different ages and occupations as to whether there is, in their opinion, really any utility in the usage of spitting on the palms of the hands, I find that there appears to be a general latent supposition that the moistening of the hands helps a workman to take a firmer hold of his axe, hoe, scythe, hammer, or what not, that is, may prevent the implement from slipping in his grasp, but I believe that the act of thus moistening the hands (which after all is often a mere pretense) is generally quite involuntary. There are good reasons to surmise that this now involuntary habit is a surviving fragment of very old superstitious beliefs which attributed to human saliva subtle and peculiar powers of working charms. For if only the mechanical effect of wetting the hands be desired, why does not the smith touch his hand to the surface of the water in the trough or barrel that stands close by his forge?

Then, on a damp day, an axe-helve will hardly slip in the hands because of being too dry, or a scythe-snath in the hands of a mower on a dewy summer morning, or when a heavy fog still rests on the meadow lands, yet the observance of spitting on the hand is not omitted for any meteorological variations. Whether gloves are worn or not seems to make no difference to ball-players in their use of the device. If any real assistance may be gained by workmen who habitually resort to spitting on the hands, it seems as though

¹ *Britannia's Pastorals*, book i. p. 129.

women might have adopted the custom in such work as sweeping and mopping floors ; but as far as I have been able to learn, the practice is in the main confined to men, though now and then a woman does wet her finger in her mouth before putting on her thimble, "to make it stick," she will tell you.

The well-known habit of pugilists, from professionals to village urchins, both here and in Great Britain and Ireland, of spitting on or at the hands before giving a blow to an antagonist, is directly traceable, or at least related, to an ancient Roman belief that a blow could thus be made heavier.¹ The converse of this belief does not seem to survive among Americans or the inhabitants of the British Isles, but according to Pliny the Romans also believed that if a person repented of an injury inflicted on an adversary, either by some missile or by the fist, and should spit in the palm of the hand which had dealt the blow, all feeling or resentment would thereby be removed from the mind of the antagonist.²

Fanny D. Bergen.

¹ Pliny's *Natural History*, Bohn's edition, vol. v. p. 289.

² *Ibid.*, loc. cit.